Volta

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Volta

by suffragettecity

Summary

It is not the Todd Anderson of Welton sitting there on that hospital cot, with his uniform blazer two sizes too big and his tie all disheveled. It is twenty-seven year old Todd Anderson, who has shed both his babyfat and meekness for a lean, manly confidence. His jaw is sharp and his cheekbones are prominent, and, to make matters impossibly worse, he has gained the startling ability to grow facial hair.

It would take a blind, foolish man not to recognize that he is handsome now. Grown-up.

Doctor Neil Perry can’t breathe.

Volta (n.) A rhetorical shift or change. When a poem takes a dramatic turn into revelation.

The Dangling Conversation

Chapter Summary

> Yes, we speak of things that matter
> With words that must be said
> "Can analysis be worthwhile?"
> "Is the theater really dead?"
>
> You're a stranger now unto me
>
> Lost in the dangling conversation
> And the superficial sighs
> In the borders of our lives
>
> Simon & Garfunkel, *The Dangling Conversation*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1969 - Manchester, New Hampshire

The first thing Neil notices is the smell. That sterile, bleached-down smell.

He enters the hospital every morning at five-thirty two, the rosy sunrise reflecting off his billowing white coat. He makes his way into the fluorescent hallway, into that sterile smell, and his routine goes as follows: nod hello to the overnight nurse, to the janitor, to the front desk girl who wears far too much rouge, and unlock his office door.

Neil Perry, M.D, the plaque reads in painted block letters. He tries very hard not to acknowledge it.

Neil then plops himself behind his expensive desk and sips at a stale cup of diner-bought coffee. CALL MOM, a sticky note instructs, laying placidly beside his landline. GET YOUR HAIRCUT.

He then runs a hand across his shaggy scalp and sighs, taking a harrowing glance at the stack of inpatient files that have accumulated sometime over the night. His job requires him to conduct a thorough dissection of said files, and he lets himself feel the sting of this vocation for a second too long. This is what he’s been working toward, he has to remind himself; there are medical degrees tacked behind

him on the cream-colored walls. There are dead dreams thrown at the feet of his boyhood, pleading for resurrection.

He picks up a file.

And it is seven o'clock by the time Neil gets back up again -- the hospital has started to buzz with sore throats, stomach aches, bumps and bruises and bodies all begging for care, and it's a bit disarming, to walk into a room and wrestle with illness, but Neil goes on breaks when he can. Smokes a cigarette outside with fellow doctors, savoring the irony, before trailing back inside to repeat the process. This is his calling.

This is his life.

Though there are times in which Neil finds himself lingering, poised, head tilted as if listening for something. A ghost of a memory will run past his peripherals, and he'll succumb to it, recalling a time and place he nearly killed himself for had it not been for the lock on his father's desk drawer. So.

Here he is.

And as the memory flutters away, Dr. Neil Perry takes a breath, in, out, and returns to the sterile, repeating a well-worn mantra until it is tattooed upon his soul:

This is my life, this is my life, this is my life.

*

"Twenty-seven year old male, sprained wrist," the pink-faced intern reads, flipping through her clipboard. "He says he slipped on a patch of ice late last night and woke up to swelling. Possible fracture?"

Neil checks his little golden watch, ten o'five, and nods along to the information. "Is it his dominant hand?" he wonders for no reason at all.

"What --?" the intern falters, flustered. "I'm not sure. He didn't look very put out, though."

Another nod. "I'll take it from here."

There are no rooms, per se, in this wing of the hospital. There are only bleach-white curtains separating the cots, privacy found in the constant drag of the fabric against the metal. There's a window to every cot, and a cot to every patient, and the distant sounds of crying babies and flu-season sniffling is a symphony Neil has forced himself to conduct. He prescribes what he can. Tries to get as many files, as many cots, empty as soon as possible.

So, no, he does not dwell on the name *T. Anderson*, nor does he think twice before pulling back that bleach-white curtain, his brown eyes stuck on his paperwork. "What seems to be the problem today?" he starts.

There are about four-to-five seconds of silence, to which the patient turns away from the sunny window with his left wrist limp on his lap. He gapes, words clogged in his throat, and squints in both disbelief and, what he hopes to be, recognition. His tweed jacket is folded by his side. His black turtleneck is rolled up at the sleeves.

There are about four-to-five seconds before he replies. "I think I might've hit my head."

Neil startles. Todd Anderson, amoeba over man, blinks back.

It is not the Todd Anderson of Welton sitting there on that cot, with his uniform blazer two sizes too big and his silk tie all disheveled. It is twenty-seven year old Todd Anderson, who has shed both his babyfat and meekness for a lean, manly confidence. His jaw is sharp and his cheekbones are prominent, and, to make matters impossibly worse, he has gained the startling ability to grow facial hair.

It would take a blind, foolish man not to recognize that he is handsome now. Grown-up.

Neil can't breathe.

Grown-up Todd continues to stare, stitching together the ten years spent apart with lingering glances. His blue eyes dart around with a childish sort of shock, a playfulness embedded in the iris. "I'm sorry," he whispers eventually, pulling his parted lips into a smirk. "You look like somebody I once knew."

The air that Neil has been previously lacking comes back to him in a gasp; everything feels too bright, too loud, and despite the December weather, terribly too hot. He fights back the urge to loosen his tie. To run. To wail.

Once upon a time, he would have charmed his way back into Todd's life with a quip -- *So you slip on some ice just to find me, Anderson?* -- but it's far too late for cocksure reunions. Especially considering the last time they saw one another, a tease would be far too insensitive.

So, "Todd Anderson," Neil musters up.

"Neil Perry," Todd returns. "Or," a tilt, "doctor?"

"Don't…" *Call me that*, is what Neil wants to say, but he can't. Instead, he just chuckles, though there is no merit in the sound; it's all awkward and breathy and so different from the cackles he used to give on stage. "Yeah. Yeah, Doctor."

Todd's smile wilts, wavering on the reality of the situation, and Neil supposes he doesn't look any better, all shell-shocked and shaky like a goddamn choir boy singing flats. There's an ugly sort of silence between them, then. A heavy, suffocating quiet.

"Suppose," Todd decides, breaking it, "you can make good use of that medical degree?"

Ah. Right.

Neil walks over.

Maybe a few years ago, this reunion would have looked a little different. Maybe there would have been tears, or embraces, or whispers spurred on by the passion of youth. But what needs to be understood now is that they've lived their entire lives alone -- entire revelations have been founded on the concept of absence. Sure, losing one another was an ache that never entirely ebbed, but it is no longer a gaping, weeping wound like it once was. It is a scab of regret that they'd occasionally pick at just to watch bleed, taking comfort in the fact it'd all heal come morning.

So no, there are no tears or embraces or whispers. There's just a strange, albeit curious look in one another's eyes, excused under the guise of doctor-patient confidentiality.

"You woke up to swelling?" Neil starts, sitting astride the bedside stool. He does not recognize the sound of his voice, and neither does Todd, evidently.

"I fell on it last night," he answers slowly. Raspily. His eyes have not stopped dancing. "I told that nice girl I slipped on some ice, but…"

Todd Anderson was drunk. “You were drunk?”

“Does that affect anything?”

“Only your pride,” Neil kids, and it surprises him, the rapid-fire pace of his wit. He can’t remember the last time he’s joked like that.

He clears his throat. “Lift your wrist.”

Todd does so, watching as Neil takes said wrist into his gentle, medically certified hand. Neil focuses on bones beneath his fingertips instead of the man they’re attached to, pressing in certain places, asking if it hurts. He has a strange sense of deja vu.

His thumb brushes against Todd’s pulse point and a hissing breath shoots out. “You have pain here?” Neil clarifies.

“*Yes.* Were you married?”

“Pardon?”

Todd gestures his head toward Neil’s left hand, that quiet, instinctual trait of observance never fading with age. “You got a tan line, doc.”

Neil looks down, catching sight of that pale strip of skin around his fourth finger. He becomes very ashamed of it, suddenly. A heterosexual scar, a brand of normalcy that’ll never heal. “I, um,” he manages. Since when did he stutter? “I was, yeah.”

“Was?”

“It lasted two months.”

And Todd laughs. Really, laughs. “Oh!” he amends after the fact, gasping at his own audacity. “I’m sorry, it’s just -- the way you said it…”

Neil lets go of Todd’s wrist, ignoring the bitter fact that he’s only heard that laugh once before: chasing each other around their dorm room, tennis shoes on the beds, pages of poetry fluttering between them as they stumbled and teased. The rest of Todd’s laughter had only been giggles, or shy smiles, or stolen chuckles broken on breaths. Neil wonders why it’s so easy for him now. To laugh like that.

“It’s alright,” he decides. “I’m guessing you’ve never been?”

“Married?” Todd mocks, his blue eyes blown wide. “*No*, I haven’t. I

never will be."

Neil recognizes what that means. Recognizes the queer implication, for such a handsome man to deny himself matrimony?

He swallows. "You fractured your wrist."

Todd deflates, looking down at his injury -- the topic of conversation, the bridge between them. "I'll have to wear a cast now, won't I?" he realizes.

"For a couple of weeks, yes." Neil uncaps a pen and begins to scribble down the information on his clipboard, ignoring how Todd seems to be fighting back the urge to say something. Part of Neil just wants him to spit it out, but then another, uglier part wants that damn man to shut up and leave. The past personified is something he'd rather not spend a long time speaking to, especially in such contexts.

Because every second those blue eyes look at him, he is reminded of what could have been. Of the poetic, spotlit dream his father killed.

As if knowing that, Todd closes his lips, compresses them, and looks back down at his lap. *Vale.*

Neil tries to smile back, but can't. He gets up instead.

Sic vita.

Except it's not goodbye, of course. Because an hour or so later, as Neil hands back yet another goddamn clipboard to the front desk nurse, he spots a dirty blonde filling out insurance information against the neighboring counter.

His name is shouted. Called.

Yawped. "Sorry," Todd amends as Neil, a bit embarrassed by the greeting, approaches. "I was afraid you'd disappear again. Can we talk?"

The cast stops around Todd's forearm, freshly placed by that pink-faced intern and already an inconvenience. Neil traces it with his eyes before meeting Todd's own. "Here?" he clarifies. A huff.

"If you're insinuating the only place we can ever talk is in a hospital, then I'll just find a flight of stairs to throw myself down."

"That's not what I'm insinuating."

“Good. I bruise easily.”

Neil can’t help it: he smiles.

And Todd faces him completely, resting his good elbow on the counter in a gesture that is so carefree, so loose in its invitation, that Neil struggles to understand how so much has changed between them. They’ve switched roles, it seems, trading confidence like elementary school children with baseball cards. He feels cheated with his deck.

“So?” Todd hopes, dragging Neil back out of his head. “Can we?”

And only then does Neil realize what’s happened. Why their roles have been reversed. This newfound confidence is because hands were placed across Todd’s eyes at seventeen and dizzy poetry was forced out of his yawp; he has applied himself to Keating’s life lessons, whereas Neil has been burying them in a dark, unseen part of himself. He’s forgotten all about past passions and Puck, throwing himself into medical school and marriages instead.

He’s failed Keating. He’s failed himself.

But he can’t fail Todd again.

So in an act of once-fabled bravery, Neil uncaps a pen, seizes Todd’s arm, seizes the day, and writes his number on the cast.

Todd practically beams.

*

“You will never believe whose number I have on my arm right now.”

Charlie sucks his teeth, nothing more than a crackle of disbelief. “*Really*,” he mutters, “huh. I was damn well sure that barista didn’t put out.”

“No,” Todd laughs, all windswept and breathy. His snow-dappled coat is still slinking off his shoulders and his face is still pink and wintry; he barely made it two steps into his apartment before leaping for the telephone, which he now adjusts between his right cheek and shoulder, working around his injury. “Think Welton.”

“Ahoy, McAllister.”

“Please.” Todd flops onto the sofa, his red scarf unwinding and his long legs outstretched. Unable to keep the secret any longer, he lets the name practically skip off his tongue, savoring how it sounds, how it feels: “Neil.”

Charlie takes a second to respond. “Oh.”

“He’s a doctor now, Charlie,” Todd continues softly. “For St. Joseph’s Hospital. He’s his father’s son.”

There’s another lagging second before a faint, bitter sigh crackles over the line, and it comes as no surprise. Within the past decade, Charlie’s hurt had congealed into anger, whereas Todd’s remained stagnant and hollow; it’s a justified reaction, considering Charlie knew Neil for longer than anybody else in the group. They were best friends, brothers. He has a right to feel betrayed.

And, oh, does Charlie feel betrayed. “How does the bastard look?”

“Sad,” Todd answers honestly, recalling the handsome stranger in a bleach-white lab coat and pressed-down tie. “And scared. Like he was born two seconds ago and doesn’t know how to breathe yet.”

“I don’t like that,” Charlie states, “I don’t like that at all. Todd, are you seriously going to call him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

It’s a good question, considering everything, but Todd isn’t the type of person to soil a good opportunity because of a grudge. He loved Neil, and a part of him still does, so he can’t just let this go. Again.

Besides, he might as well get *something* out of a fractured wrist. “Neil found me when I was at my worst, and I’m better off because of him. Even if he left us, I’m better.”

Todd hesitates, looking out the living room window as he tries to articulate his justification. The pane is frosty behind the curtains, snowflakes sticking to its cracked corners, and it reminds Todd of the last time he saw Neil: catching each other’s eyes through the windshield of Mr. Perry’s car. The play's warmth had been so easily replaced by an icy understanding of farewell -- Todd had never felt so

helpless, so scared.

“And I never got to thank him for that.”

The words are processed in silence. Todd waits, running a thumb up and down the plastic receiver, only for Charlie to hang up the phone altogether, letting his goodbye be nothing more than a fleeting, “Tell him I said hi.”

Todd sighs, another lost connection, and waits two hours before picking up the phone again.

Neil told him to call any time around one o’clock, so Todd calls at exactly 1:01, plugging each scribbled digit into the rotary perfectly. The line rings once.

“Hello?”

Todd can’t help it -- he smiles, cradling the phone like he would a lover’s cheek. “Hi doc.”

There’s a huff, “Todd,” and a creak of a door hinge; Neil must be in his office, shutting out the rest of the world. How many conversations have they had behind closed doors? “I didn’t think you’d call yet.”

“Surprise,” Todd gives, but he feels that boyish cowardice begin to creep up his throat. He tries to swallow it down, but the following words come out all shaky and torn, anyhow. “I didn’t want to waste any more time.”

Neil hums.

This is weird. This is so, so weird -- teenage romantics reduced to nothing more than awkward pauses and quick exchanges. They used to be able to talk about everything. Used to be able to swap secrets just as easily as they could glances, occasionally at the same time.

Now Todd, twenty-seven and unsure, struggles to hold a simple conversation. “Are you happy?”

Neil makes a surprised sound -- an astonished squeak. “What?”

“Are you happy,” Todd asks again, “because if you are, we don’t have to do this. We could just let old dogs lie if it’s…I don’t know, too much? Too painful?”

“Todd,” Neil laughs, exasperated, exhausted -- seventeen. “I’m fucking

miserable."

It's so certain, so undoubtedly true, that Todd's chest practically splits open at the thought. He knew that Neil was miserable, once; back then everybody was, especially in a place like Hellton, but to actually hear it?

It's heartbreaking. "Are you looking to change that?"

"I don't know what I'm looking for," Neil admits, and it's a start. "But I was thinking about you the other day, and then you show up as my patient. That's got to be a sign for something."

Todd's split-apart chest ignites. "What were you thinking about?"

"Just you. In a general sense."

"I was such a wet blanket back then, though."

"No. You were wonderful."

And as soon as Neil says it, Todd can tell he regrets it. It's not a bitter sort of regret, but a regret that comes from showing off your true self and fearing judgment. Neil hasn't said such boldly honest things in such a long time, and it feels like a sour pill he's forced himself to swallow. He's unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of prescriptions.

"You weren't so bad yourself," Todd returns, trying to ebb the awkwardness floating between a rented apartment and a hospital office. "You know, Neil, I…"

Todd can't finish the sentence, especially over the phone. He needs to see Neil's eyes -- see every little detail, hear every little breath, record every little reaction. He needs to be right in front of him, all flesh and blood: confessional.

"What?" Neil murmurs as the quiet carries on, and Todd, defeated, rips off a decade-old bandaid as quickly as he can.

"I just wish we got a better goodbye," he says.

"…Me too."

Todd closes his eyes.

"Maybe that's why we met again," Neil continues, a tone so gentle it

practically rocks Todd across a telephone wire. “To say goodbye.”

Todd shifts, fluttering his lashes back open at the discouraging implication. “Does it have to be goodbye?”

“What else would it be?”

“Hello.”

Neil doesn’t say anything. Todd wishes he had some painkillers for his damn wrist, for the brokenness has started to spread its ache across his entire body and pool around his heart. He tries to flex his fingers, flex his tongue. “Can we do this in person?”

It’s a pitiful plea, but it does the trick. Neil could never say no to such a sound, anyhow.

“I get off work at eight.”

*

Neil Perry, doctor, divorcee, dead poet, hates the winter.

He hates the chilly wind that practically cuts across his face, hates the crunch of slush that soaks up his socks, hates the slants of snow that block out everything except the orange glow of lamp posts and taxicab headlights.

And he *especially* hates walking through it, squinting against the bitter weather as he scans over icy addresses. What a bother.

Todd’s apartment is in downtown Manchester, in a not-too-yuppie neighborhood with sloping staircases and towering windows and cigarette butts in every storm drain. It’s a place Mr. and Mrs. Anderson surely would have crossed themselves over, and Neil wonders if they cut Todd off completely. Did his brother take up all the energy, then? Leaving none for dear old Todd and his whereabouts?

Neil also wonders why Todd moved to New England in the first place. Apparently, his apartment’s a seasonal rental. Temporary.

Perhaps that’ll be a good thing.

Neil finally catches sight of the designated building, the three digits Todd had repeated over the phone matching the ones on the brownstone. Hastily he climbs the stairs, careful not to slip on the salted steps, and hastily he pulls open the lobby door, fingers frigid against the metal handle.

Up up up he goes, up up up into the past, until he's standing outside of a red door on the fourth floor that has a lopsided welcome mat and a rickety knocker. The warmth of the hallway heaters has yet to penetrate Neil's trembling bones, and thus his hand shakes as he reaches up to knock.

He then runs those frigid fingers through his hair, trying to make himself presentable. He never really cared about vanity before, but when you've been beaten your entire life to try and conform, well. Rules start to become hard to break.

Besides, hospital lighting does horrors for his complexion. He might as well take advantage of this second chance to impress.

A second flutters by before Todd finally opens the door, glowing from behind the crimson wood. He's still wearing that fitted black turtleneck and washed-out jeans, and his blonde hair is falling so perfectly over his face it's hard to focus on anything else.

But then he smiles, and Neil remembers.

He remembers everything.

"Hello," Todd greets, stepping aside to let a frozen Neil dethaw. "How was the rest of your shift?"

Neil steps forward with shaky legs, trying to maintain eye contact as well as conversation; every instinct is telling him to run back down those stairs. Just by being here, he's actively betraying the life his father force-fed him, and no matter how painfully he wants to be on the receiving end of Todd's effortless smile and definitive closure, it's difficult to shake off that kind of instinct.

Patrimony. "Alright," Neil gives, letting Todd shut the door behind him in favor of looking around the apartment.

It's a studio, technically, given the fact that everything's splayed out in front of him like the pages of an open book. The bed in the far-right corner is half-made and cluttered -- in fact, every surface, from the kitchen counter to the mahogany table, is charmingly decorated with

tealights and chaos. There are two big windows in the back. There's a house plant hanging off a curtain rod.

It smells like parchment, mixed with douses of cologne and burnt cedarwood. There's a stack of what Neil assumes to be textbooks beside the bed, all of which are tabbed and annotated and thoroughly absorbed. There are letters left unopened in a basket by the door, and Neil has half a mind to reach forward and read them, desperate for any information on the man he once adored.

"Sorry, it's such a mess."

Neil shakes his head, pulled back into the present. "I don't mind."

Todd smiles again, gesturing to take Neil's snowy coat, but considering his handicap, Neil ends up doing it himself anyway. Todd then offers to make them both some tea, but Neil politely declines that, too, still wary of the scribbled-over cast.

"You need to rest that wrist of yours," he mutters. Todd blinks.

"Oh, right. Doctor's orders and all." Another blinding smile. "Should we sit down then?"

Finally, something Neil can agree to. He nods.

There's a grand old couch in one corner, two highback chairs facing it, and a lemon-polished table between them. Neil sits on the couch and Todd does a chair, facing one another like some pseudo interrogation: the crime? Abandonment and broken-hearted manslaughter. The jury is their decade-old judgment.

Neil, unsure why he feels compelled to, begins the questioning. "So what do you do?"

Todd sighs, nestling further into the evergreen cushions. "Career-wise?" he clarifies. A nod. "I'm a public school English teacher."

Neil feels something in his head ignite, both sides bitter and burnt. "Wow," is all he can muster up. Todd nods and continues.

"I was writing on the side for a while, just some silly articles, you know. Recently one of my pieces garnered some attention and I was asked to come down from New York to co-direct a play. I'll be here for two more weeks, then back to teaching."

There is so much to unpack, there, but Neil doesn't quite know where to start. Of course Todd Anderson followed his yawping creativity and continued the cycle of exploring devotions. Of course.

Still, Neil can't bear to hear him talk about it, so he decides on the least painful route of conversation. "What was the article on?"

Todd smiles. Rests his chin on his palm, looking ever so lovely in the lamplight. "Shakespeare."

It takes everything in Neil's power not to break down right then and there.

"Wow," he says again, whispering, now, "wow. Keating really did a number on you."

His throat is tight and his blood is boiling as Todd's eyes grow soft in confirmation. What's left unsaid is that Shakespeare was *Neil's* passion, once. Shakspeare was the last bridge between them, one that Todd tried to cross while Neil attempted to burn.

"Do you have a cigarette?"

Todd flutters, making a soft *ah* as he reaches into his pocket. He pulls out a crumpled case of American Spirits and begins patting around for a light; Neil pauses his efforts with a dig into his own pocket, the matches he then extracts warm from their place against his body.

"Thanks," Todd says as Neil strikes up for him, a smoker's chivalry. He leans over to light his cigarette, unable to ignore how the flame flickers around those blue eyes like a flare at sea. Save our souls.

Neil lights his own cigarette and leans back against the couch, savoring the headrush, the distraction, with a pursed lip and a long sigh. He hides his curiosity behind the tobacco, "Are you still in contact with him?" Another drag. "Keating?"

Todd gives another confirming expression as he, too, takes a savory breath. "We write back and forth when we can. He's in London with his wife."

The smoke from both of their lips meets in the ceiling, rising together, dancing in wispy pirouettes. "Tell me about him," Neil mumbles. "About them all."

Todd takes on the challenge with a gentle tone. "Keating moved back

to London and began working at a university. Charlie got into an ugly spat with his parents after a college expulsion and escaped to London as well, enrolling in Keating's classes without a penny to his name. He supported himself with odd jobs and by-the-word newspaper columns. Nowadays he writes pretty popular political essays -- a full-fledged philanthropist.

"Cameron and I followed him to London for a summer. Cameron only stayed for the season while I stayed three years -- Europe is so wonderful, Neil, have you been?"

Neil feels dazed. "I honeymooned in Lyon."

"You have to go to Prague then, you'd love it." Todd then shakes his head as if to clear his thoughts, starting up his monologues once more. "Anyways, Knox is an ivy league lawyer now. He stayed with Chris in Vermont. Got hitched, had triplets…"

"God, at our age?" Neil blurts. Todd shrugs.

"That's what people do, Neil. Get hitched, have children. *We're* the single minority."

"That's depressing," Neil laughs, tired and true. He then asks about the rest of their friends, to which Todd replies, updating him on their whereabouts.

"I lost contact with Pitts and Cameron. Knox calls when he can, usually around the holidays. Charlie and I remain the most, I don't know, tethered? We still exchange letters back and forth, if that helps. We're still close."

He pauses, reflecting, taking a solemn drag once more. "There was a night, back in London, after Charlie and I had gone out drinking. We were stumbling through the streets when suddenly he stops in front of a theater house; they were showing A Midsummer Night's Dream.

"Tipsy, and covered in snow, we decided to catch it. I remember Charlie looking over at me afterward and saying, in the most dejected tone, 'I wonder where he is right now.' I wonder where he is right now. I think all of us, even sour Meeks, still ask ourselves that question. We knew you had gotten hell from your father after the play, but I guess in our eyes there was always a possibility of you bouncing back. You always bounced back.

"You were supposed to be the best of us, Neil. You had always been

the best of us."

Outside the apartment, cars kick up slush with their tires, and it's like a shushing sound from God. Neil is still looking at Todd, desperately holding on to anything that can be communicated through a gaze and not words; he doesn't know what to say. How to respond. All he can do is blink, and hope it's enough.

I'm sorry, he is saying. Todd holds his stare. I was never as strong as you knew me to be. I was weak for you.

They take a break in conversation, tapping out against this round-one wrestle with the past.

Neil busies himself by flicking through a dusty milk crate of vinyl records, while Todd opens up a window to smoke another cigarette. He leans against the frame, shadowed by the lamplight, and stares down onto the street, lost inside his head. Seventeen again.

Neil plucks a record he hadn't heard in years out of the stack, some sort of Greenwich jazz ensemble, and decides to break the silence. "May I?"

Todd turns his head, catching sight of the sleeve, and nods. He turns back around as Neil makes his way over to the record player, settling the disk into the revolver. Slowly, and with great care, a sultry trumpet begins to rise into the apartment, flooding the once suffocating room with soft music.

Now it's Todd's turn for questioning. "How was military school?"

Neil loosens his tie, readying himself. "Horrible," he starts. The trumpet croons and sways. "Dusk to dawn drills, fixed postures. They even shaved my head."

Todd huffs. "Shame."

"Yeah. I became an outstanding and thoroughly disciplined citizen."

"Is that why you won't acknowledge it?" Todd takes a drag, the ash falling out onto the street. "What we had?"

Neil rubs the skin of his fourth knuckle out of habit, blindsided by Todd's boldness. Phantom pains. "Partially," he gives. "They weren't

exactly lenient with sexuality."

He's avoiding the underlying question, an arsenal of excuses. It's a coward's way out, and Todd knows that, because he stabs the cigarette against the rail and turns to face Neil fully, that beautiful face shadowed by confrontation.

"I loved you," he says. "I really did."

And suddenly it all comes back to Neil Perry, the nights spent in Todd's care, the subtle brushes of skin and lips and shy stutters of firsts. Poetic risks, each one taken in either caves or dormitories. Everything had been so bright, so obvious.

"I loved you too," Neil admits, because it's true, and Todd Anderson deserves the truth.

"Then why didn't you reach out?" Todd begs, and there it is, the elephant in the room. The underlying fear finally brought to the surface. "I would've understood, Neil, I would've waited for you. Hell," he laughs, "I still did. I've been waiting this entire time."

Neil feels his insides evaporate into a pool of cunning honesty -- the actor returns, dauntless and intrepid. "You think my father sent me away because of *acting*, Todd? You really believe that was the only reason?"

"He knew," Neil carries on, watching as Todd practically deflates from across the room. "He knew, and so he sent me away, and I couldn't reach out because it hurt. *I'm* hurt. I don't want to be, but I am, and now I'm a doctor and you're a teacher and we can never take those years back."

Todd shakes his head. "We can change."

Neil scoffs, but he can feel himself breaking -- a fine china soul. "I don't know how."

Todd takes a moment before crossing the room, his footsteps light against the hardwood floor. The music on the record player switches on to the next track. "I'm going to the theater tomorrow, to work on the play." Todd's hand reaches forward, as if to touch, but falls back down just as gracefully. "You can join me."

Neil hesitates, then nods; he was planning on taking tomorrow off anyway, considering he is far too shaken up to check hot foreheads

and swollen ankles. He looks up, suddenly exhausted. “I should get going, though.”

Todd gives a sad smile, knowing there was nothing he could say to make Neil Perry stay; he’s learned that lesson years ago. “Okay.”

The threshold of Todd’s apartment is a bit too metaphorical, a crimson crossroad between the past and future. Neil finishes buttoning up his coat as Todd fetches him a scarf, excusing the gift under the notion that it’s “far too cold outside”. He loops it around Neil’s neck; the white flag, a Burberry scarf.

“Thank you,” Neil says, exhaustion causing his tone to waver. Todd hums, lingering, caught in another decade old staring contest. The backlight of his apartment makes his whole body glow -- Neil feels like a moth, drawn to it. He can’t walk away.

So Neil doesn’t flinch when Todd crosses the space, tucks his good hand behind his head, and kisses him.

Neil doesn’t know what to do.

He doesn’t know what to do, and so he just stands there, all frozen and virginal in his twenty-something self. He can’t remember the last time he’s been kissed like this, and it disarms him. Freezes him. Stagefright.

Todd takes no mind to the hesitance. He just curls his fingers against the prickling skin of Neil’s nape to take him deeper, and Neil feels something inside of him click. Something dormant and unattractive.

“What was that for,” he stammers after they part, breath hot and quick. Todd shrugs, unwinding his hand.

He doesn’t say it, but Neil can see the answer in his eyes. *Carpe diem.*

“Todd…”

“I don’t care,” Todd interrupts, whispering. “I really don’t, Neil. I know I have no right in claiming that I know you anymore, but I did know you, once, when it mattered.” He pauses, blue eyes dancing, a nervous habit now disguised as charm. “And if you’re so adamant in saying goodbye, then let me say goodbye to the Neil that used to kiss me, alright?”

Neil still doesn't know what to do, and it's horrible -- he's without lines, without confidence, and he just watches as Todd softly smiles, "Alright?"

"You're the only man I've ever kissed."

Now it's Todd without words, his eyes all sad, his smile fading. He says Neil's name beneath his breath but Neil can't stop, tripping over himself to clarify.

"You're -- Todd, you're the only *man* I've ever *kissed*," he declares, and it's true. He needs Todd to understand that no matter how many times he's kissed his wife, whether it be in the presence of a priest or in the solitude of a honeymoon suite, there was always a thin layer of deceit behind it. He wasn't attracted to her; he loved her, sure, because she was sweet and kind and loved him, but it wasn't like this. A kiss didn't mean what it does here.

"So don't say goodbye to me *now*," Neil pants, all passionate and pathetic, a proper poet. "Please. Please don't, I don't think I can take it. That's why I…"

That's why I never said it back then, is what's hanging off that sentence, and it wavers between them like a shaky breath. Todd looks like he's about two seconds away from wavering himself, the hand that's still wound around the back of Neil's neck now traveling up to cradle his cheek. Neil leans into it, shutting his eyes against the cupped comfort as the two then try to make up for lost time.

"Oh, Neil," Todd mutters. "What happened to you?"

Neil doesn't know what to say, and so he doesn't say anything, too transfixed on the fact that Todd's thumb is now running along the slope of his damp cheek, unraveling his disposition; Neil melts, and they fall into an embrace.

Todd's cast rests between them like all things broken.

"I'm sorry," Neil whispers against him. Todd's one-armed grip goes tighter. "I'm so sorry Todd. I hate this."

"You can stay here," Todd offers, lips fumbling around the fabric of Neil's coat. Neil shakes his head, too weak to give in to what that entails.

So they say goodnight instead of goodbye, detangling their bodies in

the threshold of the present. A teary-eyed Neil promises to call, and Todd grins back, always so hopeful with the concept of tomorrow. He wishes Neil a safe walk to the train station.

And as Neil takes that walk, letting the snow and the shadows fall against frame, he finds himself thinking about the night of the play -- the last night he'd been truly happy. Maybe the reason he's so scared to be around Todd is because Todd can promise him a hundred more nights like that, the only catch being Neil finally having to confront himself.

He looks up, snowflakes caught on his lashes.

Our fearful trip is done, the prize we sought is won. Neil never listened to those old Whitman poems before, but perhaps now, he'd start.

Chapter End Notes

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this is my first time writing for dead poets society, despite the fact that this little movie has been in my head for years. needless to say, i hope i did it worthwhile. let me know!

love you all and see you soon, chapter two is in the works < 3
- jude

todd & neil playlist

The Child is Gone

Chapter Summary

> 'Cause I suddenly feel like a different person
> From the roots of my soul comes a gentle coercion
> And I ran my hand over a strange inversion
> A vacancy that just did not belong
>
> The child is gone
>
> Honey, help me out of this mess
> I'm a stranger to myself
>
> Fiona Apple, *The Child is Gone*

Chapter Notes

todd & neil playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re terrified.”

Neil turns, unable to conjure up an appropriate response to the statement. Todd turns back, his blue eyes dancing around with a sad sense of understanding that Neil is slightly nervous to confront.

The theater looms ahead of them like a snow-dappled grave, and all notions of bravery are blown away beneath its shadow. There’s no use in lying.

“A little bit, yes,” he admits, his chapped lips bit bloody and raw. Todd takes his hand, tugging them along the sidewalk.

“So was I,” he gives. Neil tries not to stumble and slip.

It’s a grand old building, nestled two blocks away from Todd’s apartment. The art deco architecture looks horribly beautiful in the morning light, with its wide, swooping arches and peeling paint -- the obvious signs of age do nothing but make it more lovely, especially with the way in which it cuts against the other downtown establishments. A needle in a splintered haystack.

There’s an old man on a ladder outside of the ticket booth, slipping

letters into a lightbox sign above the door: COMING SOON! He smiles politely at Todd and Todd smiles back, no qualms given toward the fact that New Hampshire's finest is currently trailing behind him like a frightened child; Neil ducks his chin. Todd's fingers squeeze.

The inside of the building is warm, all thanks to the rickety radiators humming on either side of the foyer. Todd gives a relieved sigh towards this luxury before leading them across the burgundy carpet, the snow that has caught on their soles melting in four slushy puddles past their steps.

The posters of previous shows are tacked along the walls, taunting Neil with their shiny leads like colorful eulogies. It's no surprise that he has come to associate all things acting with death, given the fact that they were once two things he craved, but it is only when they enter the theater down the hall does Neil Perry feel, for the first time in a terribly long time, resurrected.

A terrified ghost.

There are dozens of people in the auditorium, costumes in their arms and scripts in their fists. There are actors and actresses stretching, talking, laughing amongst themselves, their characters just an "action" away. There's management chattering around their coffee cups and discussing the lighting, pointing to a row of bulbs above their heads as a technician adjusts the intensity. They all turn toward the swinging doors when Todd arrives.

"Oh thank god," one calls, a greying woman with Lennon-style shades and strings of bright beads around her neck. "Finally, someone with taste! What took you so long?"

Todd grins, effortlessly conducting the atmosphere of the room; another shock slapped onto Neil's subconscious. He doesn't even realize he's still holding his hand until Todd uses it to gesture at his injury, revealing the cast like an ugly carnival prize.

"I had a bit of an accident," he explains. The room crackles in equal parts surprise and laughter, and Todd, still smiling, looks back at a ghostly Neil. "Let me go and say hello," he says. "Find a seat near the front, okay? We'll start soon."

"Okay," is all Neil manages, sounding pathetic to his own ears. Their gloved fingers detangle in a flurry of wool.

And as Todd makes his way to the group of directors, Neil makes his

own way to the center of the auditorium, feeling like a kite untied from its anchor. There's a strange feeling clouding up his head, one that's too revolted to be called nostalgia and too warm to be called dread; he tries to swallow it down, tries to put on the mask he's worn since seventeen, but it seems Todd Anderson has shattered it to pieces the same night he shattered the bones in his wrist.

There's a brown-haired boy loitering in one of the aisles, flipping through his lines with downcast eyes and furrowed brows. Neil sits four rows away from him, away from the front, slipping past the cushioned seats with cramped legs and a wandering mind -- he thinks about that boy. Thinks about the fact that, once upon a time, he looked exactly like him, all passionate and completely immersed.

He figures he hasn't looked like that in a long, long time.

"That's my doctor."

Neil lifts his eyes, accidentally eavesdropping. Todd is talking a few feet away, surrounded by his fellow managers who all ask about his handsome new companion; he blushes, answering another question given by that greying woman. Neil, not sure how to feel about that, simmers in his seat, shuffling out of his suddenly-too-warm coat just to give his hands something to do.

He tries not to focus on what everyone must be saying about him, the dots they must be connecting. Is he really that easy to read? Is his affection for Todd glaring off his face like a Times Square sign, all glittery and bright and distracting?

Did he look that way back in Welton, and if so, is it any wonder his father sent him away?

Todd eventually returns, carrying a stack of rumpled papers beneath his good arm and a little paper cup of lukewarm coffee. "We can share," he offers, squeezing into the seat next to Neil. "I got the last of the pot."

"Thanks," Neil cracks, taking the cup so Todd can rearrange himself. Papers scatter across his thighs and Neil, entranced by the reckless rhythm in which Todd carries himself, watches.

He speaks around a sip. "What were you talking about?"

"Hm? Oh." Todd shrugs, his cream-colored cableknit shifting against his shoulders. "Just you. Julianne said you have a *face meant for the*

theater."

The cup quivers in Neil's hand. "And?"

"And what?"

"And what did you say?"

Todd smiles, lopsided and small, before gracing the cup back into his steady, single hand. "I agreed."

*

Last night, before he had gone to bed, Todd found himself rifling through a textbook.

He wasn't exactly sure why, but as he flickered past those delicate pages and landed on a dusty old Plato definition, he came to understand.

"Love requires that the other be other," the Serif-print said. "You can't desire something that isn't other than you."

Plato described soulmates as being an immature notion, a childish plea to be wholly understood by another human being. It is something that all romantics grow out of, apparently. Something that time rips away from you, like wisdom teeth or insecurity.

But as Todd sits there in that decaying old theater, watching Dr. Neil Perry watch play rehearsals, he wonders if Plato got it wrong.

Because he feels completely, utterly, and honestly in love with the soul by his side.

He feels seventeen. "Any suggestions?"

Neil startles a bit at the question, whispering back. "For the scene?"

Todd nods.

Neil thinks it over with a frown, his brown eyes darting around the stage ahead of them. Despite his apprehension, he still finds himself fascinated by everything that's going on -- the occasional correction

from a director, the fumbled lines, the tech malfunctions. Maybe *his* soulmate is the theater, and Todd finds that he doesn't even mind being second to Neil's love. Just as long as Neil keeps looking like that, all starry-eyed and happy.

"I think the lead actress shouldn't enter yet," Neil eventually suggests, his chapped lips fumbling around the words. "Her lines should be said off-stage."

Todd Anderson is in love. "Why?"

Neil lets out a shaky chuckle, timid in his ability to direct. "It, um, opens up the atmosphere for the audience. Or something."

Todd smiles back, humming along to the brilliant thought. He raises his chin and jangles his pencil between his fingertips, casting the line. "Tell them."

Another startle. "Tell them what?"

"Tell them what you just told me. Trust yourself with this."

Neil works his bottom lip between his teeth, obviously anxious. But Todd has had enough of second-guessing, so he wraps those jangling fingers around Neil's wrist and raises it up for the whole wide world to see.

The whole wide world pauses, waiting for advice.

Todd gives Neil a reassuring squeeze. "Um," Neil starts, spurred on and frazzled. "So, um, for the scene, I was thinking…"

The rest of the rehearsal carries on that way, with Todd urging Neil to help him direct and Neil slowly warming up to the idea. Everybody seems to appreciate his advice, welcoming him into their little thespian club without an ounce of grievance. By the end of the day, Neil has even laughed a few times.

But then the hands on his wristwatch come together, calling for one final applause. Scripts are put back into bags, crooked backs are stretched, and goodbyes are sighed as the afternoon comes to a close. Actors trickle away like water down a window pane.

Neil looks around, a bit stunned by the suddenness of it all. "It's over

already?”

“Mm,” Todd confirms, collecting his own papers. “It goes by quickly.”

He then turns to Neil, tracing the outline of his softly-lit and slightly-pouting profile. He knows that the statement pertains to more than just play rehearsal: time, much like each other, slipped away far too soon, and they could do nothing to stop it. Nothing to make it stall.

“I have to run a few things by the company head,” Todd gives, pressing his shoulder against Neil’s own to soothe. “Wait for me here?”

“Sure,” Neil mutters, pressing back, “sure.”

And he does wait, but by the time Todd returns, Neil isn’t in his chair.

He’s on the now-empty stage, looking up at the bright lights and burgundy curtains; indulgence never looked so brilliant. His too-clean shoes click across the wooden floor in an aimless cadence, and his coat lays folded against his forearms. There’s nobody else in the auditorium.

Todd feels like he’s intruding on something immensely private.

Still, he watches from the shadows by the door, feeling his chest catch spark. Every horrible feeling, every doubt he’s conjured up within the past ten years, burns down at the feel of it, replaced instead with a blushing thought: *Look at him.*

Nothing has changed, he realizes, even if their bodies are taller and their dispositions are dimmer. Because Neil Perry still commands the stage with every breath, and Todd Anderson remains the helpless poet in his wake.

You can't desire something that isn’t other than you.

“Do you remember your lines?”

Neil looks up, watching Todd watch him. “I remember everything,” he admits, and Todd, overcome with emotion, makes his way down to the front row.

“Then prove it.”

Whether it be because of yesterday’s reunion, or just the pure adrenaline of being back beneath the spotlight, Neil takes a steadying

breath, smiles, and obliges. “If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended.”

Todd *beams*.

Shameless, open, free, the lines skip past Neil’s tongue in stunning succession, painting a mental picture of a lopsided crown made out of twigs and berries -- the monarch of every dead poet. The king of their study group and all things Shakespeare.

Neil stumbles a few times, forgetting certain cues, but for the most part Puck’s monologue is flawlessly delivered. Todd stares up at him in awe, his pink lips parted and heartbeat swelling; every syllable feels like a honey-crisp apple, savored and sweet.

“Give me your hands, if we be friends, and Robin shall restore amends.”

And it’s only then, as Neil’s last words echo across the empty auditorium, does Todd realize he never got to congratulate him on that snowy night. He never got to shower him with praise, never got to do any of the things he would have done as a twitterpated teenager.

So, now, twenty-seven year old Todd stands up from his seat, ignores the ripple of pain from his bad wrist, and gives a standing ovation the best he can with only one working hand.

The applause shatters the silence like a rock thrown through a window -- equal parts destructive and deafening. Neil blushes, flattered by collateral.

“Take your bows,” Todd instructs, still clapping. Neil stiffly folds himself by the hip and Todd laughs back, but he feels himself wavering, weighed down by a sickening wave of deja vu.

Sensing that, Neil straightens up again, looking down at Todd like a kicked puppy with his eyes all big and brown and sorry. “Todd,” he starts, “I’m --”

“I know,” Todd eases, hands falling to his sides. “I know.”

Neil’s shoulders slump a bit. “It’s funny,” he says, though Todd doubts whatever he’s about to say is particularly amusing. “Back in Welton, I made this plan to run away with you.”

Todd was right; he feels like he was just kicked in the ribs. “I would’ve

gone," he gives, "really, Neil, I would have gone with you. I loved you. "

The confession slipped out on accident, but Todd finds that he's far too overwhelmed at the moment to truly take it back. He feels stripped down to the bone, fossilized by all the things he never got to say.

And Neil just smiles, all shameless and open and free. "I know."

*

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Neil scoffs, nothing more than a huff of hot air. "These past twenty-four hours have been nothing but personal."

Todd rolls his eyes, giving in to the quick wit he oh-so desperately missed, "You know what I mean. I just wanted to ask, how are you and your father doing?"

They're walking back to Todd's apartment, side by trembling side. Neil still feels a bit dazed by everything that's been going on, the conversations they've been having, but he can feel Todd teetering, too, the sorrow that plagued his younger self returning to his disposition. He tries to ease it.

"We haven't spoken for three years," is his reply. Todd nods.

"I don't know what he expected," Neil carries on, recalling how bitterly his father reacted to being cut off. "He ruined my life, of course I'm never going to call him."

"Parents beat on you then expect you to love them for it. It's always been that way."

"Mm. What about your folks?"

"Oh, I've been officially disowned," Todd explains, turning a corner with Neil in tow. "They didn't approve of my low-class profession or European vagrancy, but what really took the cake was my tendency to kiss other men."

Neil nearly trips on his own two feet; he laughs, no, *snorts*, surprising himself with the reaction. Todd smirks back, knowing full well.

“Find that funny, do you?” he prods. “You’d be surprised to know that most of us can’t just settle down with a nice local girl and call her darling.”

“You forget that I divorced that darling,” Neil kids, jabbing his elbow into Todd’s good arm. Todd jabs back, this teasing side of him another product of Keating’s teachings. Neil saw slips of it as a teenager, sarcastic quips muttered under his breath or dramatic eye rolls hidden behind blonde lashes, but now it's out in the open. Brash.

“So you’ve been with other men?”

Todd sports him a flat look, but the high points of his cheeks seem far too pink to be blamed on the cold. “Yes, Neil,” he says. “I didn’t become celibate after you broke my heart.”

Ouch. “How many?”

“A few.”

“How many is a *few*?”

“Well wouldn’t you like to know?”

Neil laughs again, shaking his head at this waltz of wit; he isn’t sure who’s leading. “You’ve really changed, Todd,” he says, quick to clarify. “It’s good.”

Blue eyes look him over, shrouded by the winter wind; Todd has always suited the cold, ever since they were kids. “And I think you’ve stayed the same,” he replies. “But that’s also good.”

Neil hums back, for being told he’s the same boy that Todd fell in love with means the entire world to him. He’s been mourning his old self for years, when really that poetic dreamer has been with him all along -- dormant, dethawing.

Maybe the reason Todd suits the winter is because he remains so benevolent, warming up the frozen souls of all his friends.

Maybe that’s why Neil feels like he’s on fire.

They reach the brownstone a few minutes later, taking their time trekking down the snow-shoveled sidewalk. Neil offers to walk Todd

up to his apartment, to which Todd accepts, using Neil's arm to steady himself as he climbs the many many stairs. The contact, strangely, doesn't startle Neil as it once did.

In fact, he feels jilted as Todd draws his hand away to reach for his key.

"So," Todd says after unlocking the door, standing beneath its frame. "How do you feel?"

"It's difficult to say," Neil gives, leaning against the entryway. Threshold of revelation. "A bit more sure of everything, maybe."

Todd nods, his golden lashes fanned upwards due to the height difference. "What are you going to do about your job?"

Neil shrugs. Todd smiles.

They stare at each other for a moment, two young men trapped in a tango of differences, two muses fighting to break the silence. For a relationship built off of a love for words, it seems terribly ironic to be without them now -- all that's left is the hum of the hallway radiator, the buzz of the downstairs traffic, and the thumps of two heartbeats that never learned how to say goodbye. It's harrowing.

There's a strand of dirty blonde hair falling over Todd's left brow, and Neil has half a mind to reach forward and tuck it back. He wants to clear that handsome face of all its intrusions, he wants to live his life instead of fearing it, he wants to listen to all of Keating's teachings and suck the marrow out of life.

He doesn't want to leave. "I don't want to leave," he admits, surprised to find that the truth comes out so easily. Todd's smile grows sad.

"Then stay."

"I don't know if I can."

"You can do anything you want to, Neil."

And the truth is, he can. He has no father, no rules, and no wedding ring to tie him down anymore; he's adrift, desperate for something to hold on to.

So he lifts up his hands, asks for permission with a whisper, and cradles Todd's face with ten cold fingertips, branding the blushing

skin beneath him.

Todd lets himself be seized. “You’re terrified,” he realizes, hot breath mingling with Neil’s own; their lips are inches apart, their bodies decades down the past. Neil runs a trembling thumb across a cheekbone and tries to remember his lines.

“So are you,” he whispers. Todd flutters in his palm, shy and unsure.

“I thought I was hiding it so well.”

And how else is Neil supposed to respond to that, besides closing the space and kissing Todd good and slow? What else is he to do, besides take the path less traveled by?

It’s deeper than last night’s kiss, a bit wetter, too; Todd parts his lips the longer Neil presses against him, inviting slips of tongue to timidly mingle. Neil practically doubles over, putty in the hand of a beautiful man with a broken wrist and endless experience.

There’s a weightlessness in his chest that’s hard to describe, tingling down the ridges of his spine and dripping off his limbs. He isn’t quite sure how to handle it, exactly, but all he knows is that it’s called living. He’s alive.

“Breathe,” Todd mutters, kissing his upper lip. Neil smothers a gasp, failing to make use of his overworked lungs -- he’s bursting out of his body with all this want.

“Sorry,” he manages, but Todd just shakes his head, grinning. There’s a look in his eye that unravels Neil completely, but before he can act on such impulses, footsteps down the hall creak by, reminding the couple of their semi-public position against Todd’s doorframe.

Neil is only slightly mortified. “Should we…”

Todd laughs, churchbells ringing in his throat, and nods. Spurred on by such a sound, Neil moves his hand away to tuck that stray strand of hair back behind Todd’s ear, caressing his face while doing so.

Todd visibly melts. “Are you sure?”

Neil has never been so sure of something before in his life. He wants this, really, and just like yesterday night, when he teetered between the threshold of time, he begs. “Please.”

So Todd takes his hand, runs a thumb across his knuckles, and pulls him back into the past.

*

The first thing Neil notices is the smell. That familiar, sweat-soaked smell.

He finds himself staring at Todd's back, watching the juts of his shoulder blades writhe. The bare skin soaks up the sunset beautifully, reflecting the rosy winter light like a painting. A breathing painting.

Neil has never felt more enlightened.

They dozed off sometime after everything, succumbing to a sleepy satisfaction that can only come from intimacy. Neil was the first to wake, finding himself surrounded by nothing but Todd; Todd's apartment, Todd's sheets, Todd's pillows, Todd's back. It was such a jarring culmination that he couldn't bare to fall back asleep, so here he lies, watching. Waiting.

He feels like an entirely new person there in that bed. He thinks about who he was yesterday and finds a complete stranger in his memory, a doctor who didn't care about art or love. Just prescriptions and clipboards, two things he could give less of a fuck about now.

He also thinks about how he felt back up on that stage, reciting the lines his father had ruined his life over. It feels right, to take them back. To give them to Todd and Todd only.

Think but this, and all is mended.

Neil reaches forward, running the back of his hand across the ridges of Todd's spine. They unfurl as Todd stirs, shifting out of sleep with a stretch and a sigh. Neil kisses the back of his neck in hello. Todd huffs through his nose.

"Hey," he says, a quiet rasp into the evening. Neil trails his lips down a sun-soaked shoulder and hums into the skin.

Memories of the past few hours come back in waves, crashing against the atmosphere. Drowning, Todd rolls onto his back, the sheets

wrinkling beneath him. His hair explodes off his head like dirty-blonde fireworks against the pillow, and Neil finds that he's far too overwhelmed to even look at it.

So he sets his head against Todd's chest and curls there.

"What time is it?" Todd asks, his fingers ghosting over Neil's neck. Neil shrugs.

Another huff. "I don't remember you ever being like this," Todd admits, recalling their premature couplings back in Welton. "You were always so cool whenever we got this close."

"I was an actor," Neil mumbles into his sternum. "I knew how to pretend."

Todd makes a thoughtful sound at that, mindlessly brushing his thumb against the shell of Neil's ear. It's an action so tender Neil can't believe he's gone so long without it, without him. He could die right here and he wouldn't be sorry about it.

Speaking of which, "Neil?"

"Yeah?"

"Why didn't you ever tell anyone? About how much you'd been hurting?"

It's a good question, but an impossible one, too. Who's to say why Neil never opened up to anybody, why he felt burdened by things he swore nobody could understand? Keating saw a bit of it, that night in his office. Todd saw some of it, too, whenever they whispered about their childhoods or kissed away their secrets. Obviously, though, it hadn't been enough.

And then there'd been the gun, and the desk drawer that he couldn't unlock. He tries not to think about that right now, with his mind all lax in the dusk of sex, but a part of him knows that he has to.

So swaddled in the one good arm of the boy he once knew, Neil sits up, makes eye contact, and cracks himself open.

"I liked being strong for everyone," he starts. Todd hangs on to every word. "I felt like if I could convince people I wasn't as bad as I thought I was, then the lies would eventually seep through. But I've always been like that -- like this. Ever since I could remember, my

brain didn't work right. I was born hurt."

Todd lifts up a hand to soothe. Neil takes it, kissing his wrist in a silent thanks.

"I tried, after the play," he says. He doesn't need to clarify what he means by that, for the shake in his voice and the tightening of Todd's grip gives it away. "I was so ashamed of even thinking about it that I decided to go along with my father's plan. I couldn't look you in the eye ever again knowing what I tried to do, knowing that you'd hate me for it."

Without a word, Todd shifts his body upward and wraps his arms around Neil's neck, ignoring the burden that is his cast. Neil hugs him back, tightly, fearing that if he let him go these past twenty-four hours would fade away into nothing more than a dream, leaving him sick and sterile all over again.

They don't say anything for a long, long time, simply holding one another in the rosy light. Their clothes lay in discarded piles by the bed, and their explanations are lost inside of their heads, leaving them vulnerable in every sense of the word.

Neil wouldn't have it any other way.

They still need to talk about their future, about tomorrow, about tonight, but for right now all Todd can do is settle for a kiss upon Neil's shoulder, breaking the silence with a tear-clogged throat.

"Neil?"

Neil takes a steady breath, the first of many. "Yeah?"

"You were really good in that play."

Chapter End Notes

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i hope you all enjoyed this < 33

thank you for reading, comments/kudos are always appreciated

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!